

The “Last Slave Sale”

One of the persistent stories associated with slave sales on the steps of the Old Courthouse is the story of “the last slave sale,” during which a crowd of citizen activists successfully disrupted an auction on New Years Day of 1861. This story has been perpetuated through constant repetition in newspaper articles, television reports, and even history books and articles. It seems to be based on three sources:

1. **A painting entitled “The Last Sale” by Thomas Noble, created in 1880 but based on an earlier work of 1866, and currently owned by the Missouri Historical Society**
2. **A story related in the book *The Story of a Border State During the Civil War* by Galusha Anderson, published in 1908**
3. **A passage in the 1901 novel *The Crisis* by Missouri author Winston Churchill (no relation to the British statesman).**

In reality, however, the story of the last slave sale is based on just one source, and that is Galusha Anderson’s recollection in his 1908 book. Anderson was a minister and lived in St. Louis during the period he describes in his book. Many details of his book are highly accurate and he is well-regarded as an observer of St. Louis events during the Civil War. Neither of the other two sources specifically describe either a new year’s day slave sale or the calculated disruption of a slave sale on the courthouse steps.

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2.

Anderson relates in his book:

“...on the first of January, 1861, a slave auctioneer appeared with seven colored chattels of various hues...just led out by him from the jail...The auctioneer placed these cowering slaves on the pedestal of one of the massive pillars of the Courthouse...This auction of slaves had been extensively advertised, and about two thousand young men had secretly banded themselves together to stop the sale and, if possible put an end to this annual disgrace...The bid did not get above eight dollars and at the end of two hours of exasperating and futile effort, the defeated auctioneer led his ebony charges back to the jail...No public auction of slaves was ever again attempted in St. Louis...”

3.

The account in Churchill’s *The Crisis* is unrelated to the event described by Anderson. *The Crisis* describes a non-court ordered slave auction taking place on the steps of the Courthouse as a plot device; the hero of the story, Stephen Brice, a young lawyer who opposes slavery, feels sorry for a female slave who is being auctioned and purchases her with the intention of freeing her:

“As he reached the pavement, he saw people gathering in front of the wide entrance of the Court House opposite, and perched on the copings. He hesitated, curious. Then he walked slowly toward the place... There, in the bright November sunlight, a sight met his eyes which turned him sick and dizzy. Against the walls and pillars of the building... crouched a score of miserable human beings waiting to be sold at auction. Mr. Lynch’s slave pen had been disgorged that morning...”

1.

The painting by Thomas Noble, although entitled “The Last Slave Sale,” does not depict the incident in Galusha Anderson’s account, as revealed in this newspaper “review” of the painting when it first went on exhibit in 1866 (in its original form; it was lost in a fire and repainted by the same artist in 1880 in Cincinnati, Ohio). *St. Louis Daily Times* August 12, 1866, p. 2 col. 4. The transcription is by Dr. Adam Arenson:

FINE ARTS.
NOBLE’S “LAST SALE.”

Ten months’ study and labor from the above artist, has given to America a painting, which in every sense; is as much a part of the Nation’s works as the history, in whose pages slavery finds a record.

The historian and the painter work out the same end by different means. “The pen is mightier than the sword.” But I doubt if its mightiest strides are in advance of the painter’s brush.

The subject of the composition I purpose describing, is a Sale of a Slaves—a subject which I believe has never yet been treated by any of our American artists. The fact is a strange one.

The centre of the picture is occupied by a beautiful octoroon girl, who stands for sale on a platform, with her hands clasped meekly before her, and her small head bowed down, it would almost seem, by the weight of her large downcast eyes.

The beautiful expression and attitude of this figure, shows simply, the modest young girl, feeling herself the observed of a crowd.

I doubt not, but that some enthusiast of the *new race* of freed people, would pronounce her – the intelligent equal, sensible of her degraded position amongst the whites.

The auctioneer, a faithful type in every lineament of his class, is in the act of bringing the hammer down on his honest left palm, for the benefit of the last bidder, when he is stayed by another bidder in the crowd, whose extended arm and excited countenance, bespeak him a close competitor.

The faces about him, plainly indicates the interest which is felt in the bidding. Seated at a table beneath the auctioneer and his subject are two officials. One, the rising young lawyer, is recording, whilst the other, a stationary old squire, is examining through his specks an old bill of sale. Perhaps he has just discovered a flaw in the title, pointed out to him by an interested party, who stands at his official elbow.

Grouped around the base of the platform are slaves of all ages, lounging and squatting in all the easy indifference of their nature. One, she must surely have been the

cook, over-burthened with flesh and laziness, has just fallen off into the arms of Somnus. It will be well for the god, if his arms be stout enough to hold her. The *pose* of the head and body is in admirable keeping with the effects of sleep.

She sits, as she might have been seen sitting any day, in the old kitchen, after the labor of cooking dinner had been satisfactorily gone through.

Behind this drowsy load of flesh, stands leaning on her staff “old aunty” keen and sharp, like all old ladies who have raised numerous grand-children. She was the ruling spirit “on the place.” Both the white and black children had to “look smart that” when “aunty” hobbled about. Even the “master” and “missus” came in for their share of well meant reproof.

Neither place nor circumstance shall change her. . .

Prominent on the right of the picture stands a group of three (whites) discussing some important subject. They may be set down as portraiture of the three shades of our political ethics—old fogyism, conservatism and radicalism. The radical (a young man) is earnestly advancing some one of the theories his party was built on—perhaps the “equality of races”—with a good deal of warmth. His argument is listened to by the Conservative (a middle aged man) with attention. The grand “old times” has said his say on the subject, and looks surprised, with a slight touch of contempt that any young man could gainsay it. . .

If I misinterpret the artist in any part of this composition, I hope it will be in this group. For to my thinking, there is too much thought expressed in the countenance of the practical Conservative—to be produced by anything as theoretical Radical would say. . .

Overlooking all this, are two finely drawn figures of liberty and justice, each occupying a pedestal on the buttresses of the portico.

They stand, I presume, emblematical of the sanction and protection which the institution of slavery met with under the *old* constitution. There is a good architectural background to this picture. The heterogenous mass of clothing, trunk and kitchen utensils piled high in the foreground is not without its significance—breaking up of families, old associations, departures for unknown quarters, etc.

The artist’s study of his subject shows fine judgment. . .

“The last sale” is fully entitled to a prominent position in the halls of some of our public institutions,

ALFRED JINGLE,

When intern Miel Wilson attempted to uncover the facts behind the story of the “Last Slave Sale,” she found no evidence whatsoever to support the Galusha Anderson account. In fact, all of the evidence uncovered refuted the account, and it was her conclusion that the event Anderson described never took place.

1. As far as Anderson’s description of an “Annual New Year’s Day Auction,” there was no such thing, and there were only five years during the period 1828-1865 when auctions took place on Jan. 1. It is true, however, that a slave auction was held on January 1, 1861 on the steps of the Old Courthouse.

2. There were three separate occasions after the “last slave sale” when slaves were sold on the Courthouse steps, refuting this myth.

3. The strongest evidence for the non-disruption of the January 1, 1861 slave sale is the fact that the *St. Louis Republican* of January 3, 1861 (there was no paper published on January 2, because of the holiday), gave a nearly full column report of doings about town on January 1. It states that other than some drunkenness associated with some of the parties around town, St. Louis was quiet on that day; that the theft of some meat from a meat market by some boys was the most criminal event of the day. Since the *Republican* was a pro-slavery newspaper representing the interests of the Democratic Party, it would seem that some article or editorial would have appeared to protest something as radical as the disruption of a slave sale. This was not done. All of the extant St. Louis newspapers for the period January 1-10, 1861 were checked, and no evidence was found regarding a disrupted slave sale in the city at that time. (The year 1860 was also checked in December and January to be sure that the year cited by Anderson was correct).

4. The sale held on January 1, 1861 originally involved seven slaves as stated by Anderson; the seven were advertised from the estate of "Mary Ann Sappington and others," but just one, the 40 year old man Jim, was actually sold on January 1. We don't know why the other six were not sold on that day, but the advertisements for the sale in the *St. Louis Republican* only list the male slave, Jim, and not the others. Here is the recurring ad:

“GUARDIAN’S SALE OF NEGRO MAN – In pursuance of an order of the Judge of the St. Louis Probate Court, dated December 4th, 1860, I will, on TUESDAY, the FIRST DAY of JANUARY, 1861, at 12 o’clock M., at the east front door of the Court House, in the city of St. Louis, sell to the highest bidder, for cash, a negro man, (slave for life,) named JIM, aged about 35 years. T.J. SAPPINGTON, Guardian of Mary Ann, Fountain, Washington and Marshall Sappington, minor heirs of Thos. Sappington, deceased.”

[*Saint Louis Daily Republican*, December 18, 1860, p. 1; also December 20, 25, 28 and 29].

The sale of the other six slaves was delayed, and they were sold on May 4, 1861, also at the Courthouse door:

So the slave sale of January 1, 1861 was the sale of just one slave, there is no evidence of any disruption of the sale or that the sale did not take place (just because the report of sale was not filled in does not mean that the sale did not take place; in fact, if there was any trouble with the sale, it is highly likely that the managers of the estate would have come back into court to report their trouble in selling the slave(s)). Ms. Wilson’s conclusion, based on this evidence, was that the reputed "last slave sale" of January 1, 1861, never took place as described in Galusha Anderson's memoirs; and that the "public mind" has conflated three intentionally separate interpretations of slave sales on the steps of the Old St. Louis Courthouse into one "important event" in St. Louis history; the three being Noble's painting, Churchill's book excerpt, and Anderson's memoir. Only Anderson's

memoir, and it stands alone in this respect, describes an abolitionist incident on January 1, 1861. Every other piece of surviving contemporary evidence refutes his story.